1.6
18
bam

THE MEANING

OF

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

An Address delivered before the Associate Alumni of Hobart College, June 25, 1885,

BY

EDWARD O. GRAVES, M. A.

GENEVA, N. Y.:
PUBLISHED FOR THE
GENEVA CIVIL-SERVICE REFORM ASSOCIATION.
1885.

THE MEANING

OF

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

An Address delivered before the Associate Alumni of Hobart College, June 25, 1885,

BY

EDWARD O. GRAVES, M. A.

GENEVA, N. Y.
PUBLISHED FOR THE
GENEVA CIVIL-SERVICE REFORM ASSOCIATION,
1885.

No nation can withstand a strife among its own people so general, so intense, and so demoralizing. No contrivance so effectual to embarrass government, to disturb the public peace, to destroy political honesty, and to endanger the common security was ever before invented. Its existence in this nation was not designed, but was the result of a national growth and centralization, which the fathers could not foresee, and failed therefore to provide against. Every principle upon which they founded government, every practice which they inculcated, demands of us in some way to break up this system, and by removing the evils remove also the dangers with which it threatens us.—*Report of Majority of the Committee on the Alleged Frauds in the Electoral Count of 1876.*

W. F. Humphrey, Printer, Geneva.

THE MEANING OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

Mr. President, Fellow Alumni, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I must ask your permission to preface my remarks with an apology for the topic chosen for to-day's address. I know that the practice of occasions like this demands a literary subject; but in asking you to bear with me for departing from this time-honored custom, I beg you to remember that ever since leaving College, more than twenty-two years ago, my life has been spent in the civil service of my country. The welfare of that service has grown to be the great, absorbing interest of my life. At this time, especially, when I am trying to settle some of the problems of administration arising in a branch of the Government which has long been looked upon as the special preserve of patronage and political influence, I am impelled to present to you some of the convictions about the public service that long experience and observation have impressed upon my mind. And yet, in another view, no apology is needed; for there is no topic that should interest educated men more deeply than the working of the Government under which they live. Our institutions of learning have failed in one of their highest duties if they have not trained their graduates in the science of Government, and awakened in them an interest in the practical operation of our democratic system.

There is now going on throughout the United States a most momentous political revolution. This revolution has nothing to do with the mere change of parties to which the administration of the Government is for the time entrusted. It concerns rather the fundamental principles on which the Government is to be carried on. It has no partisan significance; it seeks to lift all parties up to a higher conception of public duty, and to restore the Government to the principles and practices of its founders.

This great movement, which appeals to the sympathies and support of all educated men, is known as "Civil Service Reform," or

P104 47

better still, as "Administrative Reform." But even the larger of these titles gives a very narrow idea of the real scope of the movement. Although its methods deal directly only with that part of the Government known as the civil service, its great final purpose touches our entire political system, and every department and agency of Government, Federal, state and municipal. To say that it relates merely to the way in which the clerks in the public offices are chosen is to ignore its chief purpose, which is to rid our politics of the degrading methods that now infest them, and to restore to the people of the United States the political rights of which they have long been robbed.

More than half a century ago there was introduced into our political system a most pernicious theory. This theory was summed up by one of its most distinguished adherents in the declaration that "To the victors belong the spoils of the enemy." It assumes that the public offices of every grade are prizes to be fought for at every election, and that the victorious party is to take possession of them as if they were the spoils of a barbarous conquest. The application of this theory has wrought the most deplorable consequences, not only upon the public service, but upon our whole political system. It has taught our people that the public officers are not the servants of the whole people, but of the majority that is for the time in power, and that the public offices ought to be bestowed, not upon those who have proved their ability to render efficient service to the people whose taxes they consume, but as the rewards for service to the victorious party. Under this vicious doctrine character and fitness have been ignored in the selection of the public servants. The Jeffersonian test, "Is he honest, is he capable, is he faithful to the Constitution?" has been supplanted by the query, "What service has he rendered to the party? How many speeches has he made, how many voters has he influenced or corrupted, how much money has he contributed to the campaign fund?" The effects of this theory upon the public service are just such as the thoughtful student of political science would have predicted. The public offices have been crowded with incompetents, sinecures have been multiplied, useless and superfluous offices have been continued, wasteful and round-about methods of doing the public business have been devised, and the cost of public administration vastly increased, and for what? Not that the public interests might be subserved, not that the public business might be done, but that the henchmen of a party might fatten at the people's expense.

But even these evil consequences are by no means the chief, or the worst results of the doctrine that makes partisan spoils of the public offices. The wasting of the people's money on incompetent and useless officials, though vast in the aggregate, only adds a few dollars, more or less, to the taxes which each citizen pays for the support of the Government. The inefficiency of the public servants directly affects only those who have to do business with them. Even then corruption and demoralization in the public service have a direct influence only on the relatively small proportion of the people who are brought in contact with them. But there is another effect of this system which touches every American citizen. As soon as it was decreed that the public offices should become the spoils of party victory, it became apparent that the President and his advisers could not of their own knowledge decide to whom the spoils should be allotted. The theory required that the offices should be given to the men who had rendered the most efficient service to the party. But these men were scattered throughout the United States; the President and his advisers were shut up in Washington, with no direct means of knowing who the most efficient party workers might be. There was at hand one class of men through whom this information might be got, to whom the services of every political worker were known, and who were only too willing to communicate their knowledge. These were the Senators and Representatives in Congress. Being in direct contact with the very sources of political activity, it was natural that Presidents and Cabinets should turn to them for advice and aid in the vast work of distributing the patronage. It was at this point that there was introduced into our democratic political institutions a most dangerous innovation—an evil which has grown with the growth of the country and of the public service until it has become so intolerable that the people have at length revolted against it. The turning over of the patronage to members of Congress put into their hands an instrument which they were quick to learn could be used for their own advantage. The man who has the bestowal of the public offices, who can make and unmake postmasters, collectors, inspectors and Government clerks, and the thousand other officials of the General Government whose places have been created in the last twenty-five years, has the working of the party machinery almost in his absolute power.

The primary meetings, or caucuses, are the centers of political power in this country. He who can control them, can control the

whole machinery of politics. The delegates whom they select constitute the conventions by which the nominations are made. After their work is done for each party, the voters' choice is limited to the two men that they have set up. Both may be utterly unfit, both may be equally obnoxious to the honest voter, but he must cast his ballot for one or the other, or throw away his privilege by "voting in the air," or by not voting at all. The decision at the primaries is, in truth, of vastly greater importance than the decision at the polls. The choosing of the two men out of the whole community for one or the other of whom every voter is to vote is a function much more delicate and responsible than that of deciding between the two after they are set up. But it is just at this point where the vital preliminary choice is made that the ordinary voter is powerless. If he attends the meeting, he finds the whole program arranged and its performance entrusted to a set of professional politicians or placemen. Instead of the thoughtful, responsible members of the community calmly meeting and intelligently choosing the man best representing the higher interests of the party, he finds a crowd of political workers and office-holders registering the decrees of the "Boss," or junta by whom the machinery is controlled.

I need not point out to you how un-American, how un-democratic, how subversive of the rights of the people this system is. It robs every honest voter of his political rights, perverts our whole political system, and destroys the true democratic theory of government. The spoils system is not even consistent with itself. It assumes that the offices are to be bestowed as the rewards of service to the party. In nine cases out of ten they are not so bestowed in fact. The services they reward are not rendered to the party, but to the man who, for the time being, controls the patronage. More often than not the interests of the party as a whole are injured by the appointment. How can it be otherwise, when the patronage is entrusted to men who are under the strongest temptation to use it for their own advantage? The shrewdest politicians have doubted whether in the long run the patronage does not do more harm than good to a party. Numerous as the places now are, they are far too few to satisfy all who think that their services to the party entitle them to reward. Every place bestowed on a party worker is the death knell of the hopes of a score of others who think that their deserts are equally great. It is poor consolation to the seeker after a place to know that some other man has carried off the prize. Broadly speaking, the only men who are gratified by

the bestowal of the public offices as the rewards for party service are the comparatively few to whom the prizes fall; and their zeal is likely to be relaxed as soon as they have gained the goal for which they have been struggling. The unsuccessful contestants are disappointed—perhaps alienated. All party history shows that the heart-burnings and disappointments and animosities growing out of the distribution of the offices often pave the way to a party's downfall. Twenty-five years ago the Republican party, without an office in its gift, swept the country like a whirlwind, because it seemed to represent a vital, living principle: a few months ago, with a hundred thousand offices in its hand, it was driven from power because many of its former followers thought it had proved untrue to the principles of its founders.

The system which makes office-mongering a regular business has brought forth a class of men known as professional politicians. It has come to be a common notion that politics is a dirty trade with which self-respecting men can have nothing to do. Does it not point to something radically wrong in the working of our institutions when the highest and most important function that man can exercise, that of governing his fellows, is looked upon as low and degrading? It is the spoils system alone that has brought our politics into evil repute. There is nothing inherently low or vicious in politics that they should repel honest and self-respecting men. Certainly a nation of freemen ought to be able to choose their representatives and carry on their government without all the filth and scandal that now pollute our politics. The only trouble is with the patronage. High-minded men shun political life because of their unwillingness to engage in the business of office-peddling, and to resort to the tricks and arts by which the hack politician thrives.

This system not only saddles the people with incompetent public servants; it too often introduces a distinct element of corruption into public office. The income of the office being looked upon as the reward of services rendered to a party, or to a party leader, rather than as the pay for work to be done for the Government, there is the strongest temptation to swell it by improper means. Excessive salaries are maintained in order that they may be bestowed on party workers, or be drawn upon to replenish the party treasury. Not only offices, but contracts for furnishing the public supplies are used as the rewards for party service and a source of revenue for the party finances. On every hand the public interests suffer that the interests

of party may be promoted. The scandals, the defalcations, the abuses, the extravagance, the incompetency, the lax administration, the neglect of important questions of legislation, which are the reproach of all branches of our public administration, are mostly the offspring of this wretched, barbarous system of spoils.

The influence of the spoils system on legislation is especially pernicious. It fills Congress with men who have got into power not through their knowledge of principles or their capacity to frame laws, but through their skill in manipulating the patronage. It converts Congressmen into office-brokers and robs them of the time and energies which should be devoted to their legislative duties. Above all, it establishes a relation between the legislative and executive departments that destroys their constitutional independence. The Congressmen who have saddled their dependents, or their henchmen, upon a public department dare not refuse their votes when the head of that department demands appropriations from Congress. And the head of department who has extorted from Congress an appropriation to maintain a useless number of office holders, can not deny Congressmen who demand appointments from him as the pay for their votes. Extravagant establishments are kept up that the patronage may not be diminished, and the patronage is surrendered to Congressmen that the extravagance may be maintained. The Constitution intends that the executive and legislative departments shall be separate and independent. The founders of our Government would have been shocked by the proposition that the law-makers should dictate the appointments of the executive department—nay, should virtually demand places as the price of their votes for measures for the carrying-on of the Government. Such a system destroys the checks and balances of the Constitution, and involves all departments of the Government in a mutual surrender and usurpation of functions.

There is not a word in the Constitution on which a Congressman can hang a claim to dictate an appointment to the Executive. True, certain appointments are to be made "by and with the advice and consent of the Senate," but this indisputably means the advice and consent of the Senate acting in its aggregate capacity, not the advice and consent of individual Senators engaged in a greedy scramble for appointments. The very fact that the Senate is to pass upon the nomination in this solemn manner after it is made, furnishes the strongest reason why Senators should not dictate nominations. The Constitution plainly means that the action of the President and the

Senate should be independent, each acting within its constitutional sphere, and with the sense of responsibility that the performance of a constitutional duty should impose. But if the nomination is made at a Senator's request, the separate responsibility is destroyed; the Senator, instead of acting as an independent check on the President, is engaged in an unconstitutional alliance with him. And the system reaches the last stage of departure from the constitutional intent when Senators enter into an agreement with their colleagues to confirm the nominations dictated by each other.

The whole system is a monstrous perversion of the Constitution. It is at war with both the letter and the spirit of that instrument and the theory of the division of powers among the three great departments of the Government on which it is founded. The President is robbed of a solemn constitutional function every time that an appointment is made at the dictation of a Congressman, and the Senate surrenders an equally solemn constitutional duty whenever it confirms or rejects a nomination at the instance of a Senator, without the exercise of that independent judgment which the Constitution imposes upon it. "The advice and consent of the Senate" in making appointments is as solemn a duty, and involves as grave consequences, as the decision of cases by a court. An improper appointment may affect the rights and property of the people as disastrously as an unjust judicial decision. The inquiry into the fitness of a nominee should be conducted in as judicial a spirit as the deliberations of a court. So far as the principle of the thing goes, it would be as proper for a court to permit its individual members to enter into a secret and corrupt bargain with litigants and then to permit its decision to be governed by those individual members as it is for the Senate to permit its members to enter into secret bargains with the appointing power, and then to ratify those bargains under the guise of "the courtesy of the Senate." It is only because the evil practices of a century have blunted the moral perceptions of the people, that both are not involved in the same condemnation.

If the patronage were placed beyond the reach of scheming politicians, they could no longer retain their power. The army of mercenaries would be disbanded, and the control of political affairs would revert to the people. Patriotic and respectable citizens who should attend the primaries would no longer find things "fixed" in advance by a gang of political Janizaries. Ring rule would be broken up, and the nominations for elective offices, instead of being dictated by a knot of office-holders, would become in practice what

they are in theory—the free choice of free men. I can imagine no greater or more beneficent reform in our political methods than this. Entirely irrespective of the methods of choosing the public servants which might be adopted, it would purify our politics, elevate the character of our elected representatives and rulers of every grade, and restore to the people the power of which they have so long been robbed.

The change would work little less than a revolution in our political methods. The reproach cast on democratic institutions that they reward the demagogue and exclude able and noble men from political power, would no longer be heard. There is nothing in the nature of our institutions to prevent the better class of men from obtaining either representative or executive places. There is every reason why, where the choice of the people is untrammeled, they should recognize and reward ability and character. The earlier history of our country proves this beyond question. No nobler galaxy of men ever adorned the service of any nation than those who filled the Congresses and Cabinets of the United States during the first half century of her history, before the spoils system had poisoned the very fountains of our political life. It is only since the key to office has been proficiency in the art of distributing political plunder, that the highest order of men have, as a class, been driven out of public life. It would be a gross exaggeration to say that there are no men of the higher type in public life, but it is true that they belong to a class which is less potential than in the earlier days of the Republic, and that even they, in order to sustain themselves, are compelled to resort to arts and practices that are humiliating to them. The "machine" has no love for them, and only consummate ability and great personal popularity enable them to hold their own. Bitterly as they must detest it, they dare not openly defy it.

I beg you to remember that it is not the National Government or national politics alone that this poison infects. It contaminates every agency of Government, national, state and municipal. The extravagance and corruption of municipal administration which are growing to be an almost intolerable evil, the inhumanity and ignorance constantly coming to light in the management of prisons, alms houses and insane asylums, the general inefficiency and brutality of the police in large cities, are all the direct consequence of this vicious theory of politics. In more than one great city political influence invades even the sanctuary of Justice and demands protection for its pimps and "heelers" from the tools it has placed upon

the bench. It throws its brazen shield over rum-sellers and gamblers and protects them from arrest and punishment. In the Federal service, it has time and again atttacked that noble organization, the Life-saving Service, and sought to degrade into political workers the heroic men who make up its trained corps of life-savers. No place is too high or too low, no duty too sacred or too responsible to be made the prey of its rapacious greed.

Revolt as we may against official abuses, reform as we may the mere system of administration, there will be no lasting cure until the tree of which these abuses are the fruit is torn up by the roots. This poisonous tree that sheds its deadly blight on our whole public service, federal, state and municipal, is the atrocious system of patronage. It debauches both the public and the public servants, it destroys manhood and independence, it robs merit of its reward and bestows it on servility and incompetence, it increases the people's taxes and lessens the return received for them, it makes politics a mere game in which the trickiest player wins, it keeps our best men out of public life, or drives them out if they once enter it ; in fine, it is fast undermining our political system and will, I solemnly believe, if unchecked, ultimately destroy it.

Happily the public conscience has awakened to the enormities of this system. A little more than two years ago the people rose in revolt against the tyranny of machine rule and gave the politicians a warning so emphatic that even their hardened senses could not refuse to heed it. The wrathful echoes of the people's voice penetrated even the marble walls of the Capitol. The men who up to that hour had nothing but jeers and gibes for the very name of reform suddenly saw a great light and fairly jostled against each other in their eagerness to vote for whatever measure of reform the people might demand. The experiment which less than nine years before Congressional hostility or apathy had allowed to come to an ignominious end, with scarce a corporal's guard to do it honor, was not only eagerly revived, but extended in its scope. A civil service reform bill, drawn up by a committee of reformers, but left to slumber for two years in a committee room, was speedily taken up and passed by an overwhelming majority in each House.

This act provides that admission to the purely clerical places in the departments in Washington and in the chief custom houses and post offices, shall be gained only through the gate-way of impartial competitive examinations. So far as these minor places are con-

cerned they have been put without the pale of political influence or personal favoritism. Every American citizen of the requisite age, health and character, may enter the lists on equal terms. The advocates of civil service reform do not assert that there is anything magical or infallible about competitive examinations. The old system had utterly broken down as a means of selecting fit public servants, to say nothing of its demoralizing influences in a thousand other directions. A long trial had proved that the power to appoint at discretion is sure to be abused. What should be set up in its place? Plainly some impartial system of selection that should leave no chance for discretion or favoritism. The only system of that kind that can be imagined is some sort of competition; and what is more rational than that the competition should be upon those subjects of which every one who enters a public office should have a knowledge? This nation boasts much of its system of popular education and spends much money upon it. Every thoughtful father strives to give his son the best education his means can command. Such a nation ought to welcome a system which gives every citizen a fair chance to win a place in its service, in an impartial competition in the subjects taught by its public schools. It is a contest of merit, not influence. Formerly the doors of the service were closed against even the most deserving, unless he could command a Congressman's magical "open sesame". Now they open wide to the son of the humblest and obscurest citizen, if he can but show the talisman of superior merit. No currying of influence is needed. The politician's favorite and the friendless son of the humblest citizen enter the contest on the same footing. Only the blindest bigotry or selfishness can denounce such a system as aristocratic. An aristocracy is hereditary, self-perpetuating; the reformed service is neither. It is constantly receiving recruits fresh from the people, having no influence but their own merit, and no tenure but their good behavior. Superior merit being the only passport to the service its members cannot perpetuate their power by the appointment of their relatives or friends. In one sense only can such a system be termed aristocratic: it is government by the best.

Following the example of the General Government, the states of New York and Massachusetts have applied the reform system in both their state and municipal services. All the testimony agrees that wherever the new system extends, whether in the Federal, the state, or the municipal service, its application has been followed by the happiest results. Better public servants have been obtained,

pressure and importunity for place have come to an end, the cost of the service has been diminished, arbitrary removals have ceased, and a purer and healthier atmosphere surrounds the public offices. In the departments in Washington, the clerks and others protected by the civil service rules are going on with their daily duties, undisturbed by the change of administration. Although the civil service act places no restriction on the power of removal, there is no incentive to get them out, even if the desire existed, for their places could be filled only from the lists supplied by competitive examination. From that ordeal the ordinary office-seeker shrinks. As soon as he finds that a place is protected by the civil service rules, his desire for it vanishes. The lazaretto's yellow flag could not more effectually warn him off.

But, unfortunately for good administration, all of the higher places that most excite the cupidity of the office-seeker have been excepted from the civil service law or regulations. Only a small corner of the great preserves of patronage has been reclaimed by the merit system. Of 110,000 Federal offices only about 15,000 are subject to the civil service regulations. The heads of bureaus and divisions and the chief clerks in the Washington departments, and the hosts of postmasters, collectors, marshals, attorneys, agents, inspectors, officers of customs and internal-revenue, and other officials of a hundred grades throughout the United States, are still fair game for the politicians. Upon all of these places a flock of office-seekers has swooped down like vultures upon a carcass. The offices and ante-rooms of the President and heads of departments are constantly filled with streams of applicants for place. Though nearly four months of the new administration have passed, the crowds show no diminution. The real business of Government is subordinated to the business of distributing the offices. The fault lies, not with the men who are administering the Government, but with the system which turns loose upon them the struggling applicants for a hundred thousand offices, and requires them to decide, unaided, to whom the places shall be given. Had partisan greed been permitted full play, the change of parties in the administration would have been followed by a slaughter of the public servants, whose disastrous consequences would have exceeded that perpetrated under Jackson, in the same degree that the public service has grown in numbers and importance. The only barrier against it is the fidelity to principle and the unyielding firmness of the President. True to his conviction that "public office is a public trust", he has kept

at bay the crowd of office-seekers, while he has patiently and judicially inquired into their fitness. No one who knows him or his methods will deny that he has conscientiously tried to do his duty, both to the great party that he represents, and to the public service. But the task which he has taken upon himself transcends human capacity. For one man personally to decide upon the merits of the hordes of applicants for the thousands of offices within the gift of the President, and at the same time to discharge the great executive functions of the place, is a simple impossibility. It is a degradation of the great office of President to make of him a mere balance in which to weigh the claims of rival applicants for office.

There is only one remedy; and that is to apply to all official places of every grade, the few great offices by which the policy of the Government is shaped alone excepted, the rule of impartial selection. Let there be admission to the lowest grade only on impartial tests of merit, and promotion, grade by grade up to the very top, and the whole business of office-begging and office-peddling will be at an end. Before this remedy can be applied the notion that any office, high or low, can properly be bestowed as the reward for party service must be rooted out of the public mind. The great administrative offices, by which the policy of the Government is controlled, should be awarded to representative party men, not to reward them for their services to the party, but to give effect to the popular will. As to all places below these, it is a matter of utter indifference whether they are filled by members of one party or the other. The only aim should be to get the best service the pay will command.

To be permanent, the civil service must be absolutely non-partisan. A public service recruited from one political party, by whatever method of selection, cannot survive a change of parties in the administration of the Government. There is no more reason why the subordinate clerks and officers should be in political accord with the party in power than the officers and privates of the Army should be, or than the clerks in a mercantile house should vote the same ticket as their employer. The public servants are the servants of the whole people. Members of all political parties are equally interested in the honest and economical dispatch of the public business. It is only a vicious theory that makes it the peculiar property or care of one political party. For twenty-four years the offices have been monopolized by one party. The doors of office have been shut in the faces of one-half of the people. The most radical re-

formers could not demand that the opposition on coming into power should take this partisan service unchanged off the hands of its predecessor. Changes are inevitable. But when the offices have been divided with some approach to equality between the two parties, there will be the best opportunity that has ever occurred to put the whole service on a permanent, non-partisan footing by bringing it within the operation of the civil service law. I do not say that this goal can be reached at a single bound, or by one administration; possibly many years must be devoted to patient, intelligent work and to popular enlightenment, before it can be gained. But I do hold that it is the natural and inevitable result of the Civil Service Reform movement, and that when it has been reached, the greatest political revolution this country has ever seen will have been accomplished. Before the reform can have its perfect work, every subordinate administrative office in the land which is filled by appointment must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and restored to the hands of the people. This restoration can be accomplished only by giving all American citizens the right to compete for public employment on equal terms. I do not urge this so much on the ground of the right of the people to compete for office, for that consideration affects only a few, but on the ground of their right to have the best possible service from their public servants — a consideration that concerns everybody. A grand beginning in the work of reform has been made. A revolution has begun which can never go backward. The public conscience is aroused, and it will not sleep again until the reform has purified our whole political system. Already the tone of our public service and of our politics has been greatly elevated. To insure the final triumph of this great movement, it is only necessary for the people to take in its full meaning. Civil Service Reform means that the public business shall be conducted on business principles. But it has a far deeper and grander meaning that this. It means that self-seeking, unscrupulous men shall no longer through their control of the patronage, put and keep themselves in power. It means that no bands of mercenaries hired with the people's money, shall be used by political bosses to defeat the will of the people at the primaries or the polls. It means that elections shall no longer be a wild struggle between the "ins" and the "outs" for two or three hundred thousand Federal, state and local offices, in which all the unholy passions aroused by the clash of selfish interests are let loose. It means that men shall vote according to their calm convictions on public ques-

tions, uninfluenced by any hope of gaining office, or any fear of losing it. It means that political parties shall no longer be looked upon as hostile armies, but simply as means for expressing the opinion of the people on public men and measures. It means in brief, a new declaration of political independence for the people of these United States, "in order that Government of the people, by the people and for the people may not perish from the earth."

3 0112 061942642

Single copies, 5 cents; 100 copies, $3.00. Apply to
THE SECRETARY OF THE GENEVA CIVIL SERVICE ASSOCIATION,
Geneva, N. Y.